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Methodologies for practice research: approaches for professional doctorates

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Book Review

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Professional doctoral researchers must be both researcher and practitioner in their field. Balancing time is one of the biggest challenges for those who study alongside work. Compromises and trade-offs are commonplace and having a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) myself, when I picked this book up, I initially reverted to that mindset. Will it get the reader to where they need to be? Will it bring them up to speed? Can they dip in and out, juggle personal and professional demands and still research with confidence? In our new hybrid world, the lines are blurred between the personal and professional, scholar and practitioner and moments for reading and reflection are a rare find, so when we have them, they matter.

The aim of the book is clear, it defines the professional doctorate, its origins and situates itself in the United Kingdom (with some reference to Australia and USA). The authors write from health and social care, arts, and education perspectives. Although readers with commercial or business backgrounds may not immediately align themselves with this, it gives some solid insights into different methods.

Part one offers a broad philosophical view of approaches a doctoral candidate may take, highlighting the value in spending time speculating and considering knowledge creation. Practitioners want to 'do' the work and solve problems, but it is essential to give some grounding.

Mode 1 and mode 2 (see footnote) knowledge production is explained well, and I suspect most professional doctoral (PD) candidates would not entertain or enjoy being constrained by a mode 1 University supervisor led project within an academic discipline, finding themselves on the Professional Doctorate (PD) route through a compulsion to solve problems, act and develop a deeper enquiry into a work-based issue. This serves as assurance to those that have chosen this route and is a good starting point.

From an action learning perspective, the discussion on modes for knowledge production could have been expanded to include mode 3 (Saunders et al., 2015). This is an approach to knowledge production through a mutual interest in society to solve a problem and promote the common good at various levels of aggregation. Adapted from Huff & Huff (2003) it considers how mode 3 is created both by society, for society and has long reaching fundamental benefit to all. It is highly collaborative, creating advantages to the academic and the practitioner.

In the same chapter, an interesting reference to a doctoral thesis noting the concept of 'good enough' research also caught my eye. Developed in 1953 by British paediatrician Donald Winnicott, his findings were to assure mothers who were concerned with their imperfect parenting skills that they should be content to be 'good enough.' Whilst I understand the point is to explain to a candidate who strives for academic and professional excellence that they should be pleased with what they achieve in the real world in real time, this comparison is loaded with gender biases, perpetuates female stereotypes, and shows how empirical research can date. One's position in the workplace as an insider researcher can be complicated and messy, but I would welcome a more current example of how we create

confident and balanced professional doctoral researchers rather than an outdated comparison to 1950s motherhood.

Chapter two addresses epistemological approaches and the differences between a professional researcher (PhD) and a researching professional (PD). In this context, knowledge is created from the researcher's own understanding of how they are positioned in the research, a key feature that makes a PD distinct from a PhD. This chapter could begin an insightful discussion as a group exercise, helping a candidate identify their ontological position.

Doing research to inform policy is the focus of chapter three, this is an astute strategy for a doctoral candidate to consider. Planning for impact beyond solving the problem or identifying better practice in an organisation allows for a greater legacy from a PD study. Those who can influence and contribute to policy development within the organisation and in external government institutions can create meaningful and far-reaching fundamental benefits beyond their doctoral submission.

The importance and essence of reflection is a theme that runs through this book. Jan Fook outlines the different terms, with a significant worked example of a critical incident. Essential for anyone who learns from practice. Also, useful if submitting a reflective chapter as part of the assessment process. Reflexivity and being able to reflect on research outcomes are important but being aware of the influence one has on the process is vital. For me, reflexivity can be more radical than Fook suggests and builds on reflection, asking why we did what we did. This becomes an interpretation of that reflection combining our own epistemology, ontology, and methodology. A minor point, but the definitions of reflection and reflexivity at the outset are too simplistic and the key summary at the end of the chapter is a more accurate definition. The action learning researchers among us may also feel this chapter falls a little short too.

In part two, the focus remains on the ethical conduct of a researcher, considering personal and professional integrity, resonating with the micro ethical approach (Guillemin & Gillam 2004). It reiterates the importance of PDs to conceptualise research in practice, theorise in the real world and be able to explain it outside the academy. Deep and intriguing questions are posed to give confidence to the candidate when presenting their work in academic environments. As well as highlighting the legitimacy of complex, transdisciplinary work, and the value in doing so. Integrity for those researching our society, whether that be in education, health or business is crucial. This could overwhelm a candidate returning to study but once digested it will inspire and instil confidence in one's ability to be agents of change. Chapters that follow offer useful introductions and directions on different methods; autoethnography, case study, action research and mixed methods from the perspective of a scholarly practitioner.

Concluding thoughts

As an edited book the style and tone changes from chapter to chapter, some authors have a discursive style, others are theoretical in tone, and some offer technical approaches and frameworks for analysis. However, it flows well and there is logic to the two-part structure which aligns to the progression of a professional doctorate. This is not a 'how to guide' as it offers a much broader philosophical discussion, I found the activities section that punctuate each chapter a little distracting. The extended bibliography is particularly useful offering a summary of key texts. The tone is appropriate, although new students may need time to digest sections. Overall, a well-presented research method book for the scholarly practitioner which my colleagues and I refer to regularly.

References

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*Footnote

Also consider here Saunders *et al* (2015) - Mode 1 is a research approach is designed and implemented by and for academics with a focus on theoretical knowledge. Generated through empirical research by academics and it looks for generalizable facts, cause and effect clarifications and testable explanations. Mode 2 considers that knowledge is created and grounded in the work of the practitioner in collaboration with academic or multidisciplinary teams and may be borne from financial motivation. Mode 3 is a research approach motivated by a common interest in bettering society and organisations to solve a problem, or advance shared benefits across communities.